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ABSTRACT

Jonathan Dayton's practical approach to government evolved out of his military experiences during the Revolutionary War, and he became a supporter for the equal representation of the small states. This booklet on Dayton is one in a series on Revolutionary War soldiers who signed the United States Constitution. It covers his early life, his military service from 1776 to 1783, and his public service to New Jersey as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and as a U.S. legislator. Personal data about Dayton and suggestions for further readings are also included. (DJC)

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Jonathan Dayton

Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution
A Bicentennial Series

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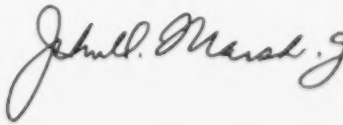
Introduction

In September 1987 the United States commemorates the bicentennial of the signing of the Constitution. Twenty-two of the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution were veterans of the Revolutionary War. Their experiences in that conflict made them deeply conscious of the need for a strong central government that would prevail against its enemies, yet one that would safeguard the individual liberties and the republican form of government for which they had fought. Their solution is enshrined in the Constitution. The President of the United States is the Commander in Chief of the nation's military forces. But it is the Congress that has the power to raise and support those forces, and to declare war. The Founding Fathers established for all time the precedent that the military, subordinated to the Congress, would remain the servant of the Republic. That concept is the underpinning of the American military officer. These twenty-two men were patriots and leaders in every sense of the word: they fought the war, they signed the Constitution, and they forged the new government. They all went on to careers of distinguished public service in the new Republic. Their accomplishments should not be forgotten by those who enjoy the fruits of their labors. Nor should we forget the fortieth man whose name appears on the Constitution. The Secretary was the twenty-third Revolutionary veteran in the Convention, who continued his service to the nation as one of its first civil servants.

This pamphlet was prepared by the U.S. Army Center of Military History with the hope that it will provide you with the background of a great American; stimulate you to learn more about him; and help you enjoy and appreciate the bicentennial.



John O. Marsh, Jr.
Secretary of the Army

JONATHAN DAYTON
New Jersey

Jonathan Dayton, who represented New Jersey at the Constitutional Convention, believed that government should defend individual freedoms, but within the framework of an established social hierarchy. He held to this traditional concept of government well into the nineteenth century. Even when the social distinctions that had guided the leaders of the revolutionary generation had long faded, he retained the manners, customs, and political philosophy of his youth. His insistence on the old ways won him the title "the last of the cocked hats." But if Dayton insisted on outmoded social distinctions, he also possessed a healthy political realism that contributed in full measure to the creation of the new American republic.

Dayton's practical approach to government evolved out of his experiences as a unit commander during the Revolution. Eight years' service in the Continental Army provided him with first-hand evidence of the consequences of weak political leadership. He became convinced that a strong central government was needed to guide and protect the new nation, and was in fact the only means by which organizations essential to future prosperity—including a professional army—could operate efficiently while remaining securely under the people's control. He also realized that the rights of small states like New Jersey needed special protection, and that a powerful government, grounded in law, provided the best guarantee of such protection.

THE PATRIOT

Dayton was born in Elizabethtown (now Elizabeth), the focal point of "East Jersey," as the northern part of the colony was commonly known. The town traditionally supplied a major portion of the colony's leaders. Dayton's father, Elias, for example, was a militia officer in the French and Indian War who returned home to prosper as a merchant and colonial official. Dayton was clearly influenced by his family's position in the community and his father's ideas about government. Both men, like most Americans of their day, believed that the average citizen should defer to the views of his "betters," while prominent citizens, those with the largest stake in society, had an obligation to lead the community, sacrificing their own interests if necessary for the common good. These beliefs moved the family by natural steps into local leadership of the Patriot cause.

Elizabethtown had a reputation for educational excellence. The local "academy," which prepared young men for college with a classical liberal arts curriculum, emerged in the decade and a half prior to the Revolution as one of

the leading schools in the colonies under the famous educator Tapping Reeve and his protege, Francis Barber. After graduating from Reeve's school, where two of his schoolmates were Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, Dayton attended the nearby College of New Jersey (today's Princeton University).

In late 1774 the First Continental Congress called on the colonies to resist Parliament's recent tax policy by joining in an association to boycott goods imported from the mother country. Both Daytons served on Elizabethtown's enforcement committee and quickly allied themselves with the local revolutionary movement. When New Jersey turned irrevocably against Royal Governor William Franklin in 1775, the state's Provincial Congress, an extralegal legislative body established by the Patriots, set about raising regular troops and reorganizing the militia. It chose the senior Dayton to lead the 3d New Jersey Regiment. The new commander promptly arranged for his fifteen-year-old son, then in the midst of his final year in college, to join the unit as an ensign. Although Dayton was absent with the regiment for the entire war, he still received his diploma with the rest of his class. Later, Princeton granted its distinguished son an honorary Doctor of Laws degree.

THE SOLDIER

The colonel and the ensign marched off with their regiment in the spring of 1776 to support the Patriot army invading Canada. Buffeted by a reinforced enemy and a serious outbreak of smallpox, the American force had already begun to disintegrate, and the fresh troops from New Jersey were diverted to the Mohawk Valley region of upstate New York to prevent an insurrection by Loyalists and Indians. The regiment spent the rest of the campaign on detached duty along the frontier, constructing Forts Schuyler (later Stanwix) and Dayton. These defensive strongpoints remained centers for the protection of Patriots in this important grain-producing region throughout the rest of the war.

In early 1777, the 3d New Jersey returned home to reorganize. Dayton, now a lieutenant, soon found himself engaged in the heavy skirmishing that took place between Washington's main army and British forces threatening Philadelphia, the American capital. When General Sir William Howe decided instead on a flank attack by sea, Dayton's 3d New Jersey accompanied Washington in a rapid march to Pennsylvania and saw action in the subsequent battles at Brandywine Creek and Germantown.

Philadelphia fell to the British in October 1777. While Howe's men enjoyed the comfort of winter quarters, Washington's continentals passed through the trial of Valley Forge. The Daytons endured the cold and hunger, but more importantly, they also received superb training under Frederick von Steuben. In June, when the British retreated across New Jersey to the safety of New

Engraving, by Charles B. J. Fevret de Saint-Memin (1798), National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

York City, the 3d New Jersey played an important role in the Continental Army's pursuit. Knowledge of the terrain, plus an excellent combat record, ensured that the regiment was in the heart of the fighting near Monmouth Court House, when the well-trained American regulars caught up with their British and Hessian opponents. Although the battle ended in a draw, the continentals finally proved themselves capable of standing toe-to-toe with the enemy in a formal European-style battle.

While Washington maintained his main force in a cordon stretching from New Jersey to Connecticut, the British shifted their attention to the southern states. The 3d New Jersey remained near home, forming part of Washington's line that separated the British garrison in New York City from the region's farms and towns. In 1779 the New Jersey unit returned to the Mohawk Valley as part of Major General John Sullivan's effort to relieve enemy pressure on New York's frontier farmers. Here the continentals, supplemented by local militiamen, demonstrated their capacity for operating successfully in a wilderness, before rejoining Washington around New York City. Dayton's service as the commanding general's aide during this campaign gave him a new appreciation for the importance of organization and discipline and led him to recognize the frontier's economic potential.

By 1780 skirmishes between Loyalists and Patriots had reduced New Jersey to a state of civil war pitting neighbor against neighbor. In October Dayton and his uncle, Lieutenant Colonel Matthias Ogden, were captured by a Loyalist

raiding party led by Elizabethtown Tories. The two spent the winter as prisoners in New York; when they were finally released in the new year, they returned to duty with a reorganized New Jersey Brigade. The unit consisted of two regiments under Colonel Elias Dayton (soon to be promoted to brigadier general). The younger Dayton, promoted to captain, transferred to the 2d New Jersey and took his company to Virginia in the fall of 1781 when Washington's main army converged for the decisive Yorktown campaign. During the siege, he led his company in the crucial nighttime bayonet attack on Redoubt 10, under the command of his old schoolmate Alexander Hamilton and their teacher Lieutenant Colonel Francis Barber.

After the British surrendered, the main army returned to the New York area. The Daytons remained in service near their homes until the Continental Army was discharged in 1783.

THE STATESMAN

Dayton came home from the war to assume important responsibilities in the family's mercantile business and to study law. Although a political neophyte, his prominence in the community, his war record, and his father's influential connections led quickly to a role in state government. When his father left to represent New Jersey in the Continental Congress, Dayton stepped up to represent Elizabethtown in the legislature. When New Jersey was selecting delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, it again turned to Elias Dayton, but the old general declined the appointment in favor of his son.

As one of the youngest members of the Convention, Dayton prudently maintained a low profile as the delegates set out to devise a new system of government. He limited his participation to supporting the initiatives proposed by the senior delegates from New Jersey, who concentrated on securing guarantees for the rights of the smaller states. In the end Dayton was part of the group that devised a federal approach to national government, creating an electoral college to select the president and a legislature of two houses: a senate that gave equal voice to the separate states, and a house of representatives that, based on population, more closely reflected the views of the citizens.

Dayton's performance in Philadelphia enhanced his political reputation at home. The New Jersey legislature promptly elected him to the closing session of the Continental Congress. Following this brief assignment he returned to serve as Speaker of the lower house of the state legislature, and, in 1791, to begin the first of four terms in the House of Representatives.

Legislative skills honed at the state level allowed Dayton to play a leading role in national government. Personal ties with Federalist leaders developed during the war led Dayton naturally to that political party. He worked closely with Hamilton, his former schoolmate, on financial policy. He also was in-

strumental in organizing Congress' response to the threat posed by the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion, and he marshaled the votes needed to approve the Jay Treaty that settled issues left over with Britain from the Revolution. He spent his last four years in Congress as Speaker of the House. There his constant support for a strong standing army, but one clearly responsible to the people through congressional appropriations and review, led President John Adams to nominate him for an important position in the force hastily organized during the 1798–1800 "Quasi-War" with France. Dayton declined appointment as commanding officer of the Corps of Artillerists and Engineers, preferring to remain in Congress. Beginning in 1799 he served a single term in the United States Senate, part of the moderate segment of the Federalist party. His pragmatic approach allowed him, for example, to cross party lines and support President Thomas Jefferson's purchase of the Louisiana Territory.

Dayton's interests in the west, first stimulated during the 1779 Sullivan Expedition, contributed to his political demise. He had invested heavily in land speculation in the Ohio region, owning claims to nearly a quarter of a million acres (a town in Ohio would be named for him). This involvement led him to loan money to his other old classmate, Aaron Burr. When illegal activities by Burr were unveiled in 1807, Dayton also fell under suspicion. Although exonerated by a grand jury, Dayton suffered from a guilt by association that effectively ended his political career. He served once again briefly in the New Jersey legislature, but he largely confined his activities during his remaining years to business and farming.

Dayton exemplifies the best in the Revolutionary generation's philosophy of political deference. Like Washington, he enjoyed describing himself as a "simple farmer," but like the Virginia aristocrat, he enjoyed the benefits of a family with strong political and financial connections. He prospered from this arrangement, but he also willingly accepted the obligation to serve his fellow citizens. To that end he risked his life and fortune on the battlefield and his reputation in the political arena.

The Congress shall have Power . . .
To raise and support Armies . . . ;
To provide and maintain a Navy;
To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the Militia . . . ;

ARTICLE I, Section 8.

Personal Data

BIRTH: 16 October 1760, at Elizabethtown (now Elizabeth), New Jersey
OCCUPATION: Lawyer, Merchant and Land Speculator
MILITARY SERVICE:
Continental Army—3 years
Highest Rank—Captain
PUBLIC SERVICE:
Continental Congress—2 years
United States Senate—6 years
House of Representatives—8 years
DEATH: 9 October 1824, at "Boxwood Hall," Elizabethtown, New Jersey
PLACE OF INTERMENT: St. John's Episcopal Church Cemetery, Elizabeth, New Jersey

Further Readings

Jonathan Dayton has not been the subject of a full-length biography. However, details of his life can be found in W. W. Clayton, *History of Union and Middlesex Counties, New Jersey* (1882); Mrs. Abner Coriell, "Major General Elias Dayton, 1737–1807," *Union County Historical Society Proceedings,* 2 (1923–34), pp. 204–11; Edwin Hatfield, *History of Elizabeth, New Jersey* (1868); Nicholas Murray, *Notes, Historical and Biographical, Concerning Elizabethtown* (1844); and Theodore Thayer, *As We Were; The Story of Old Elizabethtown* (1964). Information on his military service can be found in William Stryker's *Official Register of the Officers and Men of New Jersey in the Revolutionary War* (1872) and *General Maxwell's Brigade of the New Jersey Continental Line* (1885). Other books which shed light on the creation of the Constitution and the role of the military in the early history of the nation include Sol Bloom, *The Story of the Constitution* (1937); Catherine Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia* (1966); Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*; Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence* (1971); Merrill Jensen, *Making of the Constitution* (1979); Richard Kohn, *Eagle and Sword* (1975); Clinton Rossiter, *1787: The Grand Convention* (1966); U.S. National Park Service, *Signers of the Constitution* (1976); and Robert K. Wright, Jr., *The Continental Army* (1983).

Cover: *Scene of the Signing of the Constitution of the United States,* by Howard Chandler Christy, courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

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